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Reflections on the impact of COVID-19 on ALMA operations and NAOJ ALMA Project - A personal view -

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第40回天文学に関する技術シンポジウム, 28th Jan 2021

Outline

1. First stages of the pandemic and first response
2. Towards a plan to cope with COVID-19 in the ALMA Project and the timeline until now
3. ALMA Operations in Chile, and coordination internationally
4. Some reflections and ideas towards the “new normal”

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The start of the pandemic

- The first news about a new infectious disease spreading from China started from around January 2020.
- Travel continued as usual in January and February 2020, although with some concerns
 - EA ALMA Science workshop held in Taipei on Feb 19-21, was under careful preventive measures for the first time and the first concerns about traveling were considered
- All travel and meetings suspended from late February 2020
- From early March, the NAOJ ALMA Management team started assessing the impact on work of moving to remote work
- On March 22nd, ALMA went into observatory shutdown due to the degrading situation in Chile.

The start of the pandemic

- Due to the degrading situation in Japan and concerns over a possible declaration of a State of Emergency (SoE), the NAOJ ALMA Project asked all staff in Mitaka to move to telework from **March 30th** and initially for a 2-week period.
 - An All-hands meeting was held to address all questions and concerns by teammates
 - Work that needed to be done in Mitaka was approved on a case by case basis considering the need of the task, occupancy of building and rooms, etc.
- The State of Emergency was declared in Tokyo from April 7th until May 6th. We acted accordingly and extended the telework request period until at least May 6th as soon as the plans for SoE were public. These was further extended later as the situation evolved.
- Before the start of the telework period, the NAOJ ALMA MGT team started working on **protocols**, the **plan to comeback to the workplace** and **guidelines** to work in Mitaka, for travel, etc.

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The Plan to Comeback to the Workplace

- From the start of the pandemic, several documents were prepared to summarize the administrative flexibility allowed to cope with the situation:
 - Telework to support family or personal situation
 - Off-peak commuting
 - Special holiday in the case of difficulty to work from home or showing some symptoms
- And guidelines for travel, to work in Mitaka, etc.
- Towards early April, we had too many of those!
- There was also the need to define the basic principles of planning and decision making, at the same time that the situation was evolving very dynamically, which was challenging.
- Protocols were also prepared to control and shared attendance in the building and different rooms among the different team managers so we could plan to avoid congestion to some extent

The Plan to Comeback to the Workplace

- Principles:

1. Priority will be put on staff's wellbeing and safety
2. Health and safety take priority over any existing guidelines
3. Available flexibility of NAOJ admin rules and procedures to be actively applied
4. Guidelines for work in the workplace will follow principles recommended by experts and different bodies
5. Travel will follow existing Japanese regulation and guidelines and take a conservative approach for individual cases
6. In case of SoE, the Project moves to telework. Afterwards, we implement the Plan to Comeback to the Workplace in 2 phases



NAOJ ALMA Policies and Guidelines for the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic

NAOJ-ALMA-0039-C

Version C

Status: *Released*

2020-10-30

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The Plan to Comeback to the Workplace

- Outline:
 - **State of Emergency**: all staff requested to work from home. Requests to work in Mitaka are considered when staff need to access local facilities (labs, computing, admin) or personal needs. **Target: <10 people**
 - **Phase 1**: staff are recommended to continue working remotely. Staff who need to work in Mitaka will be allowed to work in campus. **Target: 10-20 people**
 - **Phase 2**: staff numbers increase progressively following plans established by the team and in close coordination among staff and their managers. Staff who need to continue to work from home will continue to do so. **Target: 20-40 people**

The Plan to Comeback to the Workplace

- Process:
 - The situation is monitored closely by the Project Manager and the Management team based on several indicators in official sites
 - The PM makes a recommendation to the MGT team during the regular MGT meeting held every Thursday morning for active discussion based on the situation and needs of the different teams
 - The MGT team makes a decision, and the PM communicates the decision to all staff shortly after the meeting
 - Decisions include:
 - Continue in the same phase or change back or forth
 - Period on which the decision applies
 - Time when the next decision will be made
 - If necessary, an All-Hands meeting or equivalent is held to communicate updates and receive questions/concerns from colleagues

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Timeline of measures to cope with COVID-19

- Call for Proposals for ALMA Cycle 8 of observations was opened on **March 17th 2020**, with deadline on April 15th
- **March 19th**: it was decided to extend the deadline until at least May 19th as a response to the global pandemic
- **March 20th**: an announcement was done to inform about the suspension of science operations to protect the safety of staff
- **April 1st**: Proprietary Times to extended for 3 months for data going out of proprietary time from March 19th onwards.
- **April 17th**: Submission of Cycle 8 proposals suspended until further notice
- **April 24th**: after the ALMA Board Meeting in April 2020
 - The start of ALMA Cycle 8 was postponed until 2021 October. It is anticipated that the Cycle 8 Call for Proposals will open again in 2021 March.
 - ALMA Cycle 7 will continue through 2021 September, with currently non-completed projects ranked A, B and C remaining in the observing queue.

Timeline of measures to cope with COVID-19

Timely updates have been provided in the Science Portal since May:

- **May 27th:**
 - ALMA operations remain suspended
 - We have been working actively on plans to restart operations at a time that it is feasible.
 - Caretaker teams continue to maintain the safety of the ALMA equipment and infrastructure The Regional ARCs continue to provide support to their communities.
- **July 10th:**
 - Although in some of the ALMA regions the situation is slowly improving, in other regions, including Chile, the evolution of the outbreak remains highly uncertain.
 - Because of the situation in Chile, ALMA operations unfortunately remain suspended.
- **August 27th:**
 - The situation in Chile has slightly improved in the Santiago area but not yet improved in the northern area where the ALMA telescope is located.
 - ALMA operations thus remain suspended and the timeline of resuming observations uncertain.
 - Detailed plans for the safe return to operations have been developed and regular reviews to consider starting the re-opening process of the Observatory have now started.
- **October 1st:**
 - “ALMA starts the process of recovering the telescope array”
- **November 23rd:**
 - “2020 November Status of the ALMA recovery process ”
- **January 25th :**
 - “Array Recovery Status Update”

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Some personal reflections

- Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected our lives and work deeply
 - Even our daily vocabulary! Social distance, coughing etiquette, self-quarantine, personal protective equipment (PPE), PCR test...
- Fast decision making has been necessary
- Timely and frequent communication, with the possibility of discussion to correct plans on the go, has been key
 - Timely consensus building towards timely decisions
- On the other hand, the pandemic has accelerated the implementation of some measures which are positive in principle:
 - Telework
 - Off-peak commuting
 - Digital signatures and paperless procedures

Some personal reflections - communication

- Communication is key to productivity and integration into the team dynamics
- New technologies such as Microsoft365, zoom, slack, cloud services... have made our lives easier during telework
- Frequent and timely communication at team level and from management are very important to keep team members engaged
 - From a management point of view:
 - Confirm that all managers are communicating with team members
 - Communicate frequently with all team members, if possible, through live meetings
- Frequent and open communication is also very important to detect any issues or potential isolation, mental health issues, fatigue, etc.
 - Team meetings
 - Often All-hands meetings
 - Informative talks about the project to all staff every Wednesday from Oct to Jan with initial communication of updates by Project Manager

Some personal reflections - telework

- Telework has been key to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to allow us to cope with the current situation since March 2020
- Telework has proven positive overall:
 - Reduction of commute times and infection risks in crowded public transportation
 - Possibility to handle the personal and professional situation in this difficult and ever-changing circumstances
 - Increase of work efficiency for some tasks
 - Increase of Quality of Life (QoL) with possibility of better Work-Life balance
- But we have also discovered that we need to be careful too...

Some personal reflections – telework (II)

- Not all work can be done remotely: lab work, rebooting servers...
- Telework produces fatigue, especially with many online meetings in the same room and at any time of the day
- Personal life and work start to get entangled, and even to conflict
- Working hours can become long if we do not have the discipline to make appropriate breaks and control our working time
- Possibility of isolation or insufficient communication with colleagues
- Work environment may not be the best
 - Many of us have tried all rooms in our homes... or even balconies for a change!

Overall, telework is positive and can help to increase efficiency of certain tasks and improve QoL. However, if not done properly, telework can result in a decline of efficiency or more serious mental health issues

Some personal reflections – telework (III)

I believe that telework will be with us from now on:

- The changes in this year have been very drastic and we have made it part of our lives
- The COVID-19 pandemic will not disappear over night and it will take time to come back to “normal”

Telework provides great opportunities and a mix between it and work at the workplace will be the most productive and pleasant way to work:

- Tasks in the workplace done efficiently (i.e. lab work) with other tasks left for work from home, with higher focus
- Choice between communication with colleagues or time to focus alone at home
- Flexibility to plan work and support life
 - This will put higher responsibility on staff and managers but increase QoL

The success of telework is directly related on the sustainability of the implementation: appropriate tasks, good reporting, necessary breaks...

The new normal

The way I see the new normal is:

- Mix of telework and work in the workplace for increased QoL
- Acceleration of implementation of digital paperless procedures
- Work based on objectives instead of number of hours
- Less business travel, with more opportunities for online meetings
- Workshops and large events will be a mix of presential and remote connections

Properly implemented, this will lead to increased efficiency and better work-life balance in my opinion.

Thanks for your attention!